

2 February 1965

MEMORANDUM

Religious Affiliations in South Vietnam

1. No firm statistics are available on the number of adherents to South Vietnam's four major religions: Buddhism, Catholicism, and its two indigenous sects. The latter are the Hoa Hao--an offshoot of Buddhism, and the Cao Dai, a syncretic religion drawing on Christianity, Buddhism, and Confucianist practices. No valid religious census is known to have been taken, and there has been no recent population census. Estimates of religious strength are extrapolated on the basis of earlier French statistics on the number of Catholics, the claims of the various religions which tend to be exaggerated, and current total population estimates of nearly 16 million.

2. The bulk of South Vietnam's population--including the majority of the population, perhaps 60-70 percent, which loosely identifies itself with Buddhism--practices a form of ancestor worship limited largely to the observance of traditional ancestor rites in which animist influence is prevalent. (About 500,000 ethnic minority tribesmen in the central highlands are predominantly animist). Thus in the range of 10 million Vietnamese are nominally Buddhist.

3. The great majority of these Vietnamese Buddhists are of the Mahayana school, which evolved in China and other areas of northern Asia. This school organized the General Association of Buddhists (GAB) formed in South Vietnam in the early 1950s, and provides the leadership of a revamped Unified Buddhist Association (UBA) established in January 1964 in an effort to unite all of South Vietnam's Buddhist sects. The GAB claimed a formal membership in 1963 of about 1 million, plus 2 million to 3 million more-or-less-active followers. In addition some 500,000 to 300,000 Theravada Buddhists--the school prevailing in southern Asia and in Thailand, Burma, and Cambodia--joined the UBA. The majority of Theravada Buddhists in Vietnam are of Khmer (or Cambodian) stock, and only

about 10,000 are ethnic Vietnamese. The UBA, still with an active strength of 1 million or less, forms the hard core of Buddhist militancy in Vietnam.

4. Geographically, Mahayana Buddhism draws its strength from northern South Vietnam, primarily along the coastal lowlands. Its focal point is the city of Hue, residence of South Vietnam's most powerful monk Tri Quang, but Buddhist strength extends throughout most major cities and towns of central Vietnam--Quang Tri, Da Nang, Hoi An, Qui Nhon, Tuy Hoa, Nha Trang, Phan Thiet--and into the mountain resort area of Dalat. Buddhism is also prevalent in the rural villages of central Vietnam, but central organization in rural areas is still loose. The Buddhists are well organized in Saigon, headquarters of the UBA and the stronghold of Mahayana Buddhists from the southern provinces as well as of refugees from Communist North Vietnam. Mahayana pagodas exist throughout the delta provinces south of Saigon, but have traditionally enjoyed wide autonomy from the national organization, are less militant than the UBA leadership, and, in fact, provide the strength of a small rival organization, the General Buddhist Church. Theravada Buddhism is concentrated in areas settled by ethnic Khmers, principally in Vinh Binh and Ba Myem Provinces at the south of the Mekong, and in Cambodian border areas. The Theravada school gives only tenuous support to the UBA, and does not back the political aims of the Mahayana militants.

5. The Catholic population of South Vietnam is estimated at 1.5 million to 2 million, including more than 300,000 refugees from North Vietnam who compose Catholicism's militant element. The Catholics are strongest in Saigon, Hue, and other major towns. They are also strongly concentrated in several provinces north, northwest, and east of Saigon, particularly Bien Hoa, Long Khanh, and Phuoc Tuy where there are numerous refugee settlements. There is a large Catholic community in Tay Ninh Province northwest of Saigon, and along the main highway leading to the province, and an enclave in southernmost An Xuyen Province under Father Hoa, a Chinese refugee. Catholic settlements extend into the Mekong Delta but probably include no more than five percent of the population of most delta provinces. They are found in many land development centers throughout the country, particularly in Binh Dinh Province and around Qui Nhon, where many of the northern refugees were settled.

6. The Hoa Hao sect claims about 2 million followers, but this figure is probably double its actual strength. The Hoa Hao are concentrated in An Giang and Chau Doc Provinces, near the Mekong where it enters Cambodia, but they spill over into Kien Giang, and as far south as Chuong Thien and An Xuyen Provinces. The Cao Dai sect, which claims 1.5 million adherents, probably has less than 1 million members. Its center is in Tay Ninh Province, the site of the Cao Dai Holy See; Cao Dai are estimated to number one third of Tay Ninh's total population of 233,000, and are heavily settled in the delta provinces of Kien Hoa and Dinh Tuong, with a scattering in ten other provinces. Hoa Hao and Cao Dai power derives largely from their once powerful, autonomous armies which were subdued by the Diem government; company-sized units formed by the sects are again cooperating with Diem's successors, and many provinces outside Hoa Hao and Cao Dai strongholds now find the sects a principal source of recruits for their provincial paramilitary forces. This revival of Hoa Hao and Cao Dai armed strength is a source of uneasiness in many delta provinces, and among the Catholics in Tay Ninh Provinces where the Cao Dai control the provincial administration.

7. Although there is considerable religious friction in some rural areas, particularly between Buddhists and Catholics in central Vietnam, many provinces--especially in the southern half of the country--report no religious problem in the countryside. Religious conflict is sharpest in the larger cities and towns, where it is essentially political, and primarily between Buddhists and Catholics. At the height of a governmental crisis last August, sharp street fighting between Buddhist and Catholic mobs erupted in Saigon, and there were also some serious clashes in some of the northern coastal towns. Although responsible leaders on both sides deplored the violence, renewed political tensions could bring a recurrence of communal strife. In most urban areas, despite the fact that many law enforcement officers share Catholic suspicions of Communist influence among the Buddhists, the Buddhists appear to be a stronger force. They influence, although they may not fully control, most student groups except purely Catholic organizations. In Hue, 5,000 persons may normally turn out to hear Tri Quang speak, and as many as 20,000 have participated in Buddhist demonstrations, whereas the largest

pro-Catholic demonstrations have totaled about 5,000. In Saigon, a major Catholic demonstration mustered about 50,000 people, while close to 150,000 turned out for a politically charged Buddhist funeral. The extent to which either group actually hires troublemakers is unknown, but both have potentially violent elements--the Catholics from a militant settlement in Bien Hoa near Saigon, and the Buddhists among emotionally volatile youth. Demonstrations, particularly by the Buddhists, have frequently been the occasion for apparent Viet Cong terrorist exploitation.

8. Various factors other than size alone, however, affect the relative strength of religious organizations in South Vietnam. The dynamic, militant leadership of the Buddhist Institute is a more potent political force than the size of its active membership would suggest. Much of this strength comes from the successful Buddhist campaign against Diem, which drew sympathy from most of Diem's political opponents, including many Catholics, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and others not sympathetic with present Buddhist assertiveness. The power of the Buddhist political monks in central Vietnam also probably results as much from traditional regional animosities as from religious factors. Similarly, the Catholics, by superior education in French-run schools in Vietnam or abroad, have provided a greater share of Vietnam's talented elite than their numbers warrant, although they still are a minority of the country's leaders. Furthermore, they are a more tightly knit, disciplined, and ideologically cohesive group than are the Buddhists.

STAT

Approved For Release 2003/05/16 : CIA-RDP79T00472A000700010015-5

Next 1 Page(s) In Document Exempt

Approved For Release 2003/05/16 : CIA-RDP79T00472A000700010015-5